

Trinity Church  
November 30, 2008

First Sunday of Advent  
RCL, Year B, Advent 1

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Restore us, O God of hosts.  
Show us the light of your countenance  
And we shall be saved. (Psalm 80)*

There was an article in the *Sun* last year by a woman whose name is Angela, entitled "I have got to get organized." The article was about her mother, who called her daughter, Angela, every Sunday afternoon from her home in Texas. The conversation began the same way every week. "Angela, I'm fixin' to clear off the dining room table." Even though Angela was seven hundred miles away, she could see in her mind's eye the scattered bills, letters, magazines, receipts, old menus and shopping lists that cover every inch of the polished maple table.

Angela's parents stopped eating in the dining room years ago, shifting to TV tables in the living room. They eat in front of the television. And every day more paper streams in through the mail slot in the front door and lands in a heap on the table, and overflows onto the hutch, and on to the bureau in the spare room.

"I have got to get organized," Angela's mother repeats week after week. "I'm tired of not being able to have people over for dinner." Now, to be fair, sometimes Angela's mom actually starts to tackle the daunting mess. But then she discovers linens in their original packaging that she was waiting to use when the table was cleared, and the little boxes of unlabeled photographs of relatives only she can identify, and clothes she was saving to wear after her diet had reached its goal. All of these unfinished projects make her tired, and she gives up until next week's phone call, when she says again, "I have got to get organized," and Angela ponders the task ahead of her when her mother is gone and she will have to clear out the house. If only the Surprise Shop were in Texas.

The Advent message of Jesus is crystal clear. "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. Therefore, keep awake." Get organized. Cast away the works of darkness.

Jesus says these words in a particular context that is essential to grasping his meaning. The first part of this context is the apocalyptic language he invokes. "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." This language, like Isaiah's language that invites God to "tear open the heavens and come down," links what Jesus wants to say to God's final and complete purpose for all things. Be alert because God is about to do what God does — reveal God's very self, and with it the purpose and destiny of all. This is really important — essential — and you don't want to miss it. Be alert.

The second part of the context is that Jesus asks us to be alert just as the passion narrative, the story of Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection, begins in the Gospels. In this regard Jesus is saying a word to us and to himself. To himself, he is saying that he will never be true to God's call in this time of ultimate trial, suffering, and death, if he does not keep alert and focused on what purpose God is working out in and through his life. If he looks aside from God's love for him even for an instant, he may be lost. But to us he is saying, if you don't stay awake and focused, you will miss the point of this story, you will fail to see that what is happening to me in my death is what Isaiah called for when he asked that the heavens be torn open and that God

should come down. God has come down to suffer and die. God has come down to be raised in glory and make the whole creation new! You will miss it if you are not clear-headed and alert, just as I must be alert and clear-headed if I am to be faithful in what God is accomplishing in me. You have got to get organized. Serious things are happening.

Henri Nouwen says it this way in his little book, *Watch for the Light*. "Our waiting is always shaped by alertness to the Word. It is waiting in the knowledge and expectation that God wants to address us. The question is, are we home? Are we ready to answer the doorbell? Are we ready to invite the Word into our lives? Then, when the Word comes, it can become flesh in us." That wise saint, Julian of Norwich, says it another way: "Repentance makes us clean; compassion makes us ready; but yearning opens the door of the soul for God." That's how we get organized.

So, Angela's mom, stop saying you're fixin' to clear off the dining room table, and do it. Time is running out. Just push all that stuff off the table and into the dumpster. Every half-finished project and great expectation and worthless trivia. Throw it all away. Cast off the works of darkness. Then put the Bible, God's Word, right in the middle of the polished table, and open the door to the neighbors, and sit around with nothing but the Word before you. And then listen and hear and receive the Word; let it become flesh and have it bring forth new life in you, the end and purpose of God in our lives as it was in Jesus' life. It is about to happen. You must be ready.

And if it's good advice for Angela's mother, I think it is necessary advice for us as well. Keep awake.